



Egyptian soldiers wielding antitank weapons as they prepare to ambush tanks

2. Establish bridgeheads of ten to fifteen kilometers depth on the east bank,
3. Inflict as much damage as possible in men, weapons, and equipment,
4. Repel and destroy Israeli counterattacks,
5. And be prepared for further missions depending on the situation.

Egyptian planners allotted four to five days for crossing the Suez Canal, capturing the Bar-Lev Line, and establishing bridgeheads twelve to fifteen kilometers in depth. Each field army would have one continuous bridgehead, with the Bitter Lakes serving as a natural barrier between the Second and Third Field Armies.

Then, on the fourth or fifth day of the war, a decision would have to be made either to proceed with an offensive eastward, most likely to capture the passes, or wait for further developments before making that decision. Sadat's strategic directive on 5 October clearly left the question of a second phase dependent on an assessment of the overall situation. Senior Egyptian commanders knew the follow-on missions would almost certainly involve seizing the three strategic passes of Bir Gifgafa, Giddi, and Mitla, some fifty to fifty-five kilometers from the Suez Canal. Therefore, the Egyptian Armed Forces planned and trained as if they would seize the Israeli

passes, with or without an operational pause. The Egyptians expected to transfer some SAM assets to the east bank for that offensive.

While the Egyptians planned for and expected to attack toward the passes, with timing being the variable, the top political and military leadership apparently lacked serious commitment to implement this second phase of Operation Badr. This tiny circle of leaders included Sadat, Ahmad Ismail, and Shazli, each of whom had his own reasons for reticence. Sadat was more inclined to make bold political moves, not military ones. Establishing bridgeheads on the east bank would suffice to break the diplomatic stalemate; anything that risked these military gains would jeopardize his bargaining position after the war. Shazli, as chief of the General Staff, vigorously opposed the second phase, believing such an attempt would prove suicidal: the Egyptian Air Force lacked the capability to challenge the Israeli Air Force for control of the skies, and a move to the strategic passes lay outside the Egyptians' air defense umbrella. Ahmad Ismail, the war minister, held a similar evaluation to that of Shazli; for him, a drive to the passes appeared an unnecessary gamble given the history of the Egyptian Army in fighting the Israelis.³⁶

Thus, an inherent tension or ambiguity existed between Egypt's political and military objectives. The passes acted as a magnet for senior Egyptian commanders, who, like Sadiq earlier, thought in terms of waging war by either decisively defeating an opponent or capturing strategic terrain. Sadat, however, was mainly concerned with breaking the diplomatic stalemate, not so much in capturing land per se. In Arabic parlance, he envisioned more a war of political movement (*al-tahrik*) through limited military action than a war of liberation (*al-tahrir*) by a major seizure of land. A military assault on the Bar-Lev Line and the capture of land on the east bank would, in his view, suffice to force the superpowers, in particular the United States, to become involved in the Arab-Israeli problem. A limited but successful military operation would enhance Egypt's strategic importance and thus provide Sadat with diplomatic leverage. While Sadat sought psychological effects that would strengthen his diplomatic position—for which any seizure of territory in a major operation might suffice—the Egyptian Armed Forces, for their part, prepared for a war designed to capture the passes.

Though not primarily interested in seizing territory, Sadat did, however, need some terrain on the east bank. Thus, his attention focused on the rapid capture of Qantara East. Located on the east bank of the Suez Canal, this virtual ghost town had been, before the Six Day War, the second most important city in the Sinai after al-Arish. Its recapture would carry immense propaganda value, being the first instance of Arab forces capturing a city held by Israeli troops. To facilitate the swift occupation of the town, as demanded by Sadat, Ahmad Ismail decided to reinforce the 18th Infantry Division, into whose zone of operations Qantara East fell, with an armored brigade. Sadat also directed General Command to take Ismailia and Suez City (outside the range of Israeli artillery) as quickly as possible to avoid the embarrassment of having these two Egyptian cities bombed by Israeli ground fire. Again, the war minister solved the tactical problem by attaching a tank brigade each to the 2d and 19th Infantry Divisions. Finally, the commanders of the 7th and 16th Infantry Divisions, the last two remaining divisions involved in the crossing operation, clamored for their own tank brigades, and Ahmad Ismail yielded to their requests. Operation Badr thus ended up with five divisions crossing the Suez Canal on a broad front, each augmented by an armored brigade.³⁷ (See map 2.)

These decisions underscored the great emphasis Sadat and Ahmad Ismail placed on the crossing operation, each showing reticence for follow-on missions. To commit five tank brigades to the crossing phase, however, required stripping armor assets from each field army's operational reserves, those very forces that would be used in a move to the passes. Each infantry division gained additional forces—one armored brigade of ninety-six tanks, one commando battalion, and one SU-100 battalion of tank destroyers. Operation Badr committed 1,020 tanks to the crossing operation, leaving 580 on the west bank, 330 in the operational reserve, and 250 in the strategic reserve.³⁸ Egyptian war planners expected to defeat Israeli counterattacks by throwing in all available weapons and employing a combined arms doctrine hinging on air defense and leg infantry.

It was natural to employ the bulk of resources to the risky mission of assaulting the fortified positions of the Bar-Lev Line. An Egyptian failure would result in heavy human and materiel losses, and the Egyptian Armed Forces would then require several years of rebuilding before making another such attempt. Most likely, Sadat would not have survived politically such a major military defeat.

FINAL PREPARATIONS. By the end of September 1973, the Egyptian Armed Forces and their Syrian allies were prepared for war and awaited the green light from their civilian leadership. Once the order was given, all that remained was to mask the Egyptian intent for war, thereby undermining Israeli war plans, which expected a forty-eight-hour advance warning. To achieve strategic surprise, the Egyptians implemented an elaborate deception plan and hoped for Israeli miscalculations and fortuitous events.

On 13 September, an unexpected incident occurred that would cloud the Israelis' judgment over the next several weeks. A routine Israeli reconnaissance overflight of Syria and Lebanon turned into a major dogfight as Syrian fighters challenged the Israeli planes. At the end of the air combat, Israeli pilots had downed twelve Syrian MiGs while losing only one Mirage. This incident formed an important backdrop to the outbreak of war.

Israeli leaders now expected Arab retaliation as revenge for the Syrian humiliation suffered in the aerial encounter. Within two weeks, the IDF noted unusual military activity across their northern border. On 26 September, at 0815, Lieutenant General David Elazar, the chief of the General Staff, convened a high-level meeting with senior officers and staff to evaluate intelligence reports indicating possible military action by Syria. Syria's General Command had canceled leaves, activated numbers of reserve officers and soldiers, and mobilized civilian vehicles. Despite these disconcerting moves, Israeli Military Intelligence confidently insisted that Syria would not go to war on her own and that Egypt was too preoccupied with internal matters to contemplate any military adventurism. Instead, Syria might opt for a show of force or, in a worst-case scenario, try to snatch part of the Golan Heights. Despite assurances from Israeli Military Intelligence of a low probability for war, Elazar ordered the transfer of the 77th Tank Battalion from the Sinai to Golan as a precautionary step.

Reports of increased Syrian military activity continued over the next few days, heightening concern in Tel Aviv. By 30 September, virtually the entire Syrian Army had deployed to positions from which it could assume an offensive. Su-7 planes, for instance, had moved to forward air bases, and reports of Syrian armor units moving from northern Syria to the front reached The

Pit, the command center for the IDF located in Tel Aviv. Each day brought new information challenging the general Israeli assessment of a low probability of war.

Meanwhile, developments along the Sinai front caused far less concern for the Israeli General Staff than those in the north, even though the events occurred simultaneously and should have aroused more anxiety. While Syrian forces were moving into place, the Egyptians ingeniously used their annual peacetime maneuvers, announced far in advance, to mask their intent for war. Consequently, initial Egyptian military movements near the Suez Canal failed to appear out of the ordinary. This peacetime training exercise began on 26 September, the day before the Israelis began celebrating Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, which somewhat distracted the IDF.

The Egyptians continued to implement a carefully orchestrated deception plan designed to delude the Israelis into believing that the Egyptian Armed Forces were unprepared for war and were merely conducting a routine training exercise.³⁹ Egyptian accounts tend to present a story of meticulous and deliberate planning and cleverly designed deception. However, the overconfidence and serious misconceptions of the Israelis played a major role in allowing Egypt and Syria to achieve such surprise.

The Egyptians took numerous steps to prevent Israeli intelligence from getting wind of the war. A key element in the strategic surprise was to limit severely the number of Egyptians and Syrians privy to the date of the attack. On 22 September 1973, Sadat and Asad ordered their war ministers and chiefs of the general staffs to begin hostilities on 6 October, thus providing them fourteen days' advance warning.⁴⁰ Slowly word filtered down to subordinate commands. On 1 October, Ahmad Ismail informed the two Egyptian field army commanders of the date. Division commanders were notified on 3 October, brigade commanders on 4 October, and battalion and company commanders on 5 October. Platoon commanders learned of the war only six hours before the attack.⁴¹ On the civilian side of the house, only a few key individuals learned of the approach of war, and virtually all senior ministers were kept in the dark so that they could perform their official duties in a routine fashion. By 1 October, a number of senior officials understood that war loomed but had no knowledge of the exact date or time until war broke out.

A number of other steps were taken to deceive Israel's Military Intelligence. In September, Sadat attended the Nonaligned Conference in Algeria, ostensibly returning to Egypt near exhaustion and ill. For several days before 6 October, Sadat remained out of the public limelight while Egyptian intelligence carefully planted false stories about his illness and even initiated a search for a home in Europe for him, purportedly for his medical treatment, adding further credibility to the floating rumor. To paint a picture of normalcy in the armed forces, Egyptian newspapers announced the holding of sailboat races that would involve the commander of the Egyptian Navy and other naval officers. Business on the diplomatic front included a routine invitation to the Rumanian defense minister to visit Cairo on 8 October, two days after the scheduled attack. In addition, the foreign, economic, commerce, and information ministers were all out of the country, conducting their normal business activities. The Egyptian military also planted stories in Arab newspapers of serious problems with Soviet equipment, thereby hinting at the unpreparedness of the armed forces. To lull the Israelis into further complacency, the government announced on 4 October 1973 a demobilization of 20,000 troops and ostentatiously granted leaves for men to perform the Pilgrimage to Mecca. Finally, as a last touch, on the

morning of the attack, Egyptian soldiers were positioned as innocent fishermen along the Suez Canal, giving an ordinary, peaceful appearance to things. The Egyptian deception plan was thus comprehensive, covering both political and military spheres, and integrating strategic, operational, and tactical movements from the president to the individual soldier—all designed to fool the Israelis until they discovered the Egyptians' intent too late.

The timing of the attack coincided with the final phase of the annual autumn maneuvers on the west bank, scheduled to end on 7 October. On 27 September, Cairo Radio announced the mobilization of reservists. General Command used this training exercise to bring combat units to their staging areas near the canal, and the forty-meter sand rampart along the canal permitted field commanders to conceal a portion of their troops near the water's edge. A unit would move to the canal rampart for training and then withdraw, leaving part of the unit behind with orders to remain concealed until further orders. These maneuvers, which commenced on 1 October according to schedule, proved a brilliant cover for final war preparations. Although Israeli Military Intelligence noted an unusual level of Egyptian communications for a peacetime maneuver and an exceptional level of troop deployment near the canal, no senior Israeli military official seriously questioned Military Intelligence's estimate of a very low probability for war. Everything appeared normal precisely because the general feeling was that the Egyptian Armed Forces would not dare fight the Israelis from a position of weakness.

There was another important reason why no senior Israeli officer seriously questioned Military Intelligence's assessment. Back in May 1973, a similar situation of heightened Arab military activity had raised anxieties in Tel Aviv. Despite Military Intelligence's assurances of a very low probability for war, the government, at the request of the chief of the General Staff, had mobilized some reservists at great cost to the treasury. In this case, the intelligence community proved right, and now, in September and early October, as a result of this previous experience, the assessments by Military Intelligence received little critical cross-examination from senior commanders.

FINAL STEPS. Proper coordination between the two fronts loomed as a last major item for Arab consideration. On 3 October, General Ahmad Ismail Ali, who as Egyptian war minister also served as general commander for the Egyptian and Syrian Armed Forces, and Major General Baha al-Din Nofal, his chief of operations for the two fronts, flew to Damascus to meet with senior Syrian commanders to inspect last-minute preparations and determine the time for the attack. A surprise awaited these Egyptians. The Syrians apparently wanted a twenty-four to forty-eight-hour delay, and a disagreement surfaced over the timing of the offensives. The Syrians pushed for a dawn attack so that the sun would be in the eyes of the Israeli defenders on the Golan, whereas the Egyptians argued for an assault at 1800 so that darkness could cover their canal crossing. To resolve the matter expeditiously, Ahmad Ismail appealed to Asad, who agreed to an attack on 6 October and compromised on 1405 for a combined offensive.⁴² This compromise proved fortuitous, for Israeli Military Intelligence later reported the combined Egyptian-Syrian attack as commencing at 1800.

The Egyptians and Syrians almost inadvertently divulged the secret of their combined offensive. Because the conduct of the war depended on Soviet assistance, Sadat and Asad decided to provide the Soviets with advance warning of their intention. As a result, on 3 October, Sadat informed the Soviet ambassador in Cairo of Egypt's and Syria's intent to go to war against Israel

and requested assurances of Soviet assistance. Asad, for his part, did the same on the next day, revealing to the Soviets the exact date of hostilities. The Kremlin surprisingly responded to this information by requesting permission to evacuate its embassy families from Egypt and Syria. Both Sadat and Asad reluctantly granted this request.⁴³ Late in the evening of 4 October, Israeli intelligence learned of the move of Soviet planes to both countries to evacuate the families of Russian officials; the departure took place on 5 October. By taking this unusual step, the Kremlin most likely sought to convey an appearance of noninvolvement in the Arab decision for war, thereby assuring the continuance of détente with the United States.⁴⁴

Word of the unexpected departure of Soviet families from Cairo and Damascus caught the Israeli leadership completely by surprise. At 0825 on 5 October, Elazar held a conference with senior commanders to discuss the latest development. No one could find an adequate explanation for such an unusual move. Even Ze'ira, the director of Military Intelligence, found his self-confidence shaken, but he quickly found comfort in the prewar conception that Syria would not dare fight alone and that Egypt would not fight a major war without a capable air force. That third-dimension capability, as Arabs themselves admitted, would not materialize for a couple years.

Despite assurances from Military Intelligence of a low probability for war, Elazar took some precautionary measures on both fronts that proved critical for the approaching armed conflict. He canceled all military leaves, placed the armed forces on C (the highest-level) alert, and ordered the air force to assume a full-alert posture. In addition, he ordered the immediate dispatch of the remainder of the 7th Armored Brigade to the Golan Heights to join its 77th Tank Battalion (which had been there since 26 September). By noon on 6 October, the Israeli force on the Golan numbered 177 tanks and forty-four artillery pieces.⁴⁵ These additional reinforcements would save the Golan from certain Syrian capture. To replace the departed 7th Armored Brigade in the Sinai, the Armor School, under the command of Colonel Gabi Amir, received word to activate its tank brigade (minus one tank battalion earmarked for the Golan) for immediate airlift to Bir Gifgafa in the Sinai, less its tanks. Amir's brigade was in place when war began the next day.

Despite the above measures, no decision was taken to mobilize the reserves, and there was good reason for that. Elazar and other senior commanders still expected at least a day or two warning of an impending Arab attack, as had been promised by Military Intelligence.⁴⁶ Such an advance alert would provide ample time for the mobilization of the reserves and for the air force to destroy the Arab air defense systems. Nothing of the sort occurred, however; the Israelis' plans were founded on the shifting sands of a best-case scenario.

The religious factor also complicated the Israeli decision-making cycle. Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement), the most solemn day in Judaism, fell on 6 October, the day of the Egyptian and Syrian offensives. To call-up the reserves on the eve of this holy period without a clear warning from Military Intelligence was not an easy decision. Moreover, on the Arab side, both Egypt and Syria were observing the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, with 5 October falling on the ninth of the Islamic calendar. For Muslims to wage war during Ramadan was not without precedent but still appeared as an unlikely course of action.

The Arabs' intention to make war finally became revealed. Definite word from Ze'ira reached Meir, Dayan, and Elazar shortly after 0430 on 6 October.⁴⁷ An "indisputable" source indicated a joint Egyptian-Syrian attack scheduled for 1800 that day. Israeli Military Intelligence

had failed to deliver on its tacit contract and now provided a wake-up call of only nine and a half hours before the outbreak of hostilities. Compounding this failure, Ze'ira erred further in identifying the time of the Arab attack as 1800 when, in fact, the Egyptians and Syrians actually planned their assault for 1400. These two failings created confusion for the IDF, and combined Egyptian and Syrian offensives caught Israeli reservists in the first stages of their mobilization. Regular units were still making final preparations for the onslaught expected in the early evening. After the Six Day War, the Israelis were rightfully confident in possessing a first-class intelligence community. The political and military leadership, however, had depended too much on Military Intelligence, and the Arabs had, in fact, won the first phase of the information war.

As soon as word arrived of the impending Arab offensives, the Israeli political and military leadership immediately went into action. Elazar telephoned his air force chief, Major General Benyamin Peled, who promised to be ready for a preemptive air strike by 1200. The chief of the General Staff also held a series of high-level meetings with his staff, senior commanders, and Dayan, where steps were taken to prepare the armed forces for war. But the most important decisions awaited the political leadership.

At 0805, Elazar met with Prime Minister Golda Meir and her kitchen cabinet, a meeting that lasted until 0920. Two key issues received serious attention. To ensure a favorable military situation at the onset of hostilities, Elazar recommended a preemptive air strike against Syria, but Dayan, the defense minister, counseled against one, citing the adverse American and international reaction that would result and mark Israel as the aggressor. Meir supported her defense minister on this issue. With the strategic depth gained from the 1967 War, Israel could take advantage of its geographical position and accept a first strike. Failing on the first issue, Elazar pressed for the mobilization of the entire air force and four armored divisions, a total of 100,000 to 120,000 troops. Dayan, however, favored only two armored divisions or 70,000 men, the minimum required for defense against full-scale attacks on two fronts. Meir, on this issue, sided with Elazar.

Seven years after the Six Day War, the IDF was once again confronted with another major conflict. This time, however, the initiative lay squarely with the Arabs, as the outbreak of war found Israeli reservists scrambling to reach their mobilization centers. Because the Egyptians and Syrians had won the opening round, the intelligence struggle, they would dictate the first phase of the war. As a result, numerous failings and mistakes would beleaguer the IDF and beg for accountability after the war. All this would play directly into Sadat's war strategy.

THE EGYPTIAN ASSAULT. The surprise achieved by Egypt and Syria was complete, stunning virtually everyone in Israel. This success allowed the Egyptians to dictate the tempo of the battlefield during the first phase of the war, as the crossing operation generally went according to plan.

The Egyptians assaulted the Bar-Lev Line with two field armies and forces from Port Sa'id and the Red Sea Military District. The Second Field Army covered the area from north of Qantara to south of Deversoir, while the Third Field Army received responsibility from Bitter Lakes to south of Port Tawfiq. The Bitter Lakes separated the two field armies by forty kilometers. The initial phase of the war involved five infantry divisions, each reinforced by an armored brigade and additional antitank and antiair assets. These units crossed the Suez Canal and established bridgeheads to a depth of twelve to fifteen kilometers over a period of four days (from 6 to 9

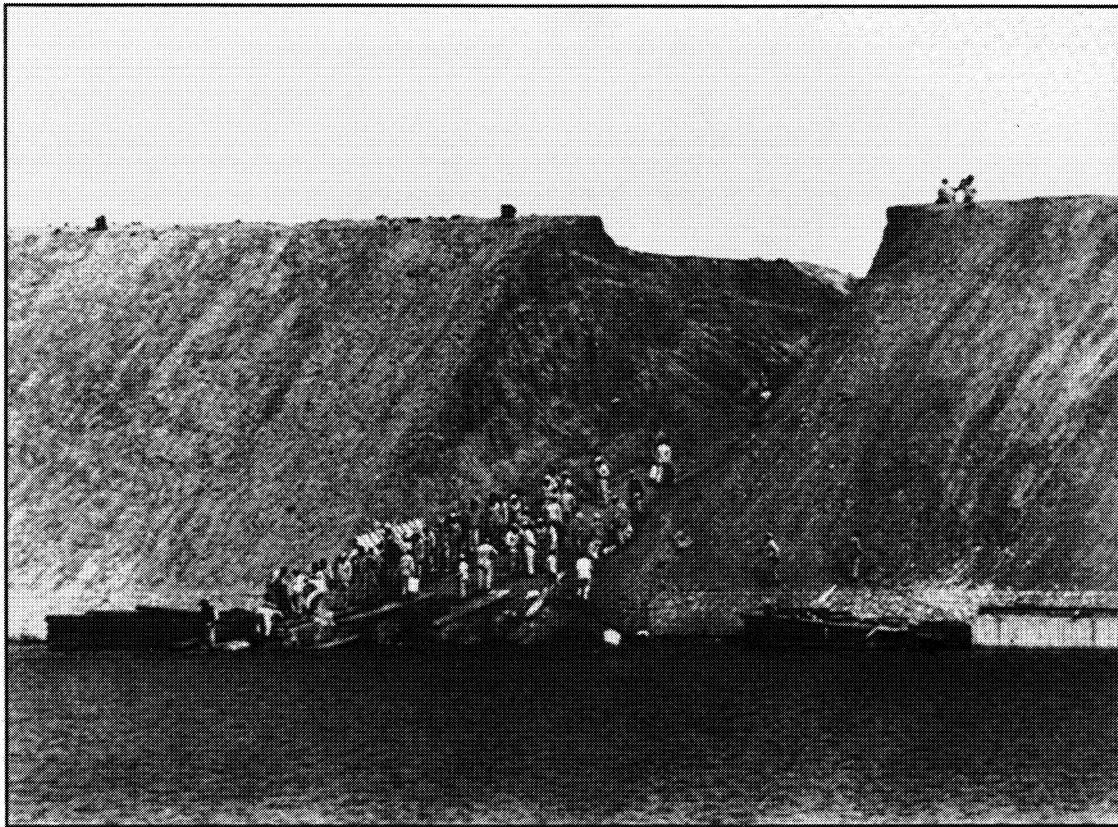
October). This assault force, containing over 100,000 combat troops and 1,020 tanks, accomplished most of its mission over a period of forty-eight to seventy-two hours.

At precisely 1405, the Egyptians and Syrians began their simultaneous air and artillery attacks. On the southern front, 250 Egyptian planes—MiG-21s, MiG-19s, and MiG-17s—attacked their assigned targets in the Sinai: three Israeli air bases, ten Hawk missile sites, three major command posts, and electronic and jamming centers. Meanwhile, 2,000 artillery pieces opened fire against all the strongpoints along the Bar-Lev Line, a barrage that lasted fifty-three minutes and dropped 10,500 shells in the first minute alone (or 175 shells per second). The first wave of troops, 8,000 commandos and infantrymen in 1,000 rubber assault rafts, crossed the Suez Canal at 1420. Special engineer battalions provided two engineers for each rubber boat. Once across, the two engineers returned to the west bank with their boats while the disembarked infantry scaled the ramparts. The first units reached the east bank at 1430, raising their flag to signal the Egyptians return to the Sinai.

After scaling the ramparts, the Egyptian commandos and infantry, armed with Saggars, bypassed the Israeli strongpoints and deployed one kilometer in depth, establishing ambush positions for the anticipated armored counterattacks. Subsequent waves of Egyptians brought additional infantry and combat engineers, the latter to clear minefields around the strongpoints. Operation Badr called for twelve waves, crossing at fifteen-minute intervals, for a total of 2,000 officers and 30,000 troops deployed to a depth of three to four kilometers by dusk. The first eight waves brought the infantry brigades across; waves nine to twelve ushered in the mechanized infantry brigades.

Within the first hour of the war, the Egyptian Corps of Engineers tackled the sand barrier. Seventy engineer groups, each one responsible for opening a single passage, worked from wooden boats. With hoses attached to water pumps, they began attacking the sand obstacle. Many breaches occurred within two to three hours of the onset of operations—according to schedule; engineers at several places, however, experienced unexpected problems. Breached openings in the sand barrier created mud—one meter deep in some areas. This problem required that engineers emplace floors of wood, rails, stone, sandbags, steel plates, or metal nets for the passage of heavy vehicles. The Third Army, in particular, had difficulty in its sector. There, the clay proved resistant to high-water pressure and, consequently, the engineers experienced delays in their breaching. Engineers in the Second Army completed the erection of their bridges and ferries within nine hours, whereas Third Army needed more than sixteen hours.

Two hours after the initial landings on the east bank, ten bridging battalions on the west bank began placing bridge sections into the water. The Soviet-made PMP heavy folding pontoon bridges allowed the Egyptians to shorten the construction time of bridges by a few hours and to repair damaged bridges more rapidly by simple unit replacement. The PMP bridges caught the Israelis (and many Western armies) by surprise. Unfortunately for the Egyptians, they possessed only three such state-of-the-art structures; the remainder were older types of bridges. Concomitant with the construction of real bridges, other bridge battalions constructed decoy bridges. These dummies proved effective in diverting Israeli pilots from their attacks on the real bridges. Meanwhile, engineers worked frantically to build the landing sites for fifty or so ferries. By the next day, all ten heavy bridges (two for each of the five crossing infantry divisions) were operational, although some already required repair from damage inflicted by Israeli air strikes.



The War of Atonement: October, 1973

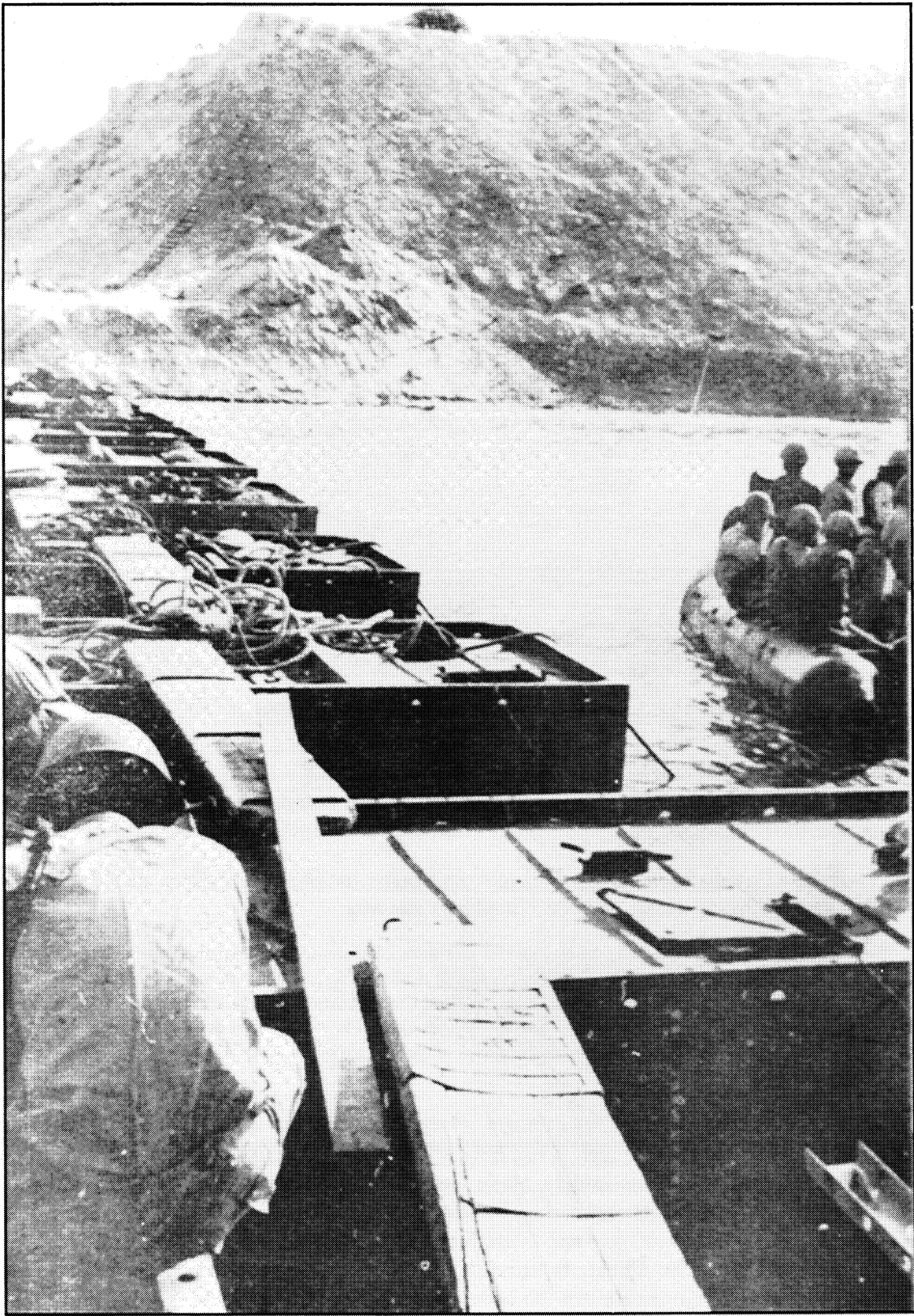
One of the breaches in the Israeli rampart as seen from the Egyptian side of the canal

The bridges and ferries together allowed the Egyptians to transport heavy equipment to the east bank at a pace faster than that anticipated by the Israelis before the war. Ten hours into the operation, the first tanks began crossing under the cover of darkness to reinforce the bridgeheads.

All these Egyptian achievements caught the Israelis completely off guard. Israeli reactions varied. Prime Minister Golda Meir described hers this way:

The shock wasn't only over the way that the war started, but also the fact that [a] number of our basic assumptions were proved wrong: the low probability of an attack in October, the certainty that we would get sufficient warning before any attack took place and the belief that we would be able to prevent the Egyptians from crossing the Suez Canal. The circumstance could not possibly have been worse. In the first two or three days of the war, only a thin line of brave young men stood between us and disaster.⁴⁸

Defense Minister Moshe Dayan noted wryly, "the Egyptian and Syrian attack on Yom Kippur came as a surprise, though it was not unexpected."⁴⁹ Regular officers were as hard hit by the surprise as the political leaders. Major General Avraham Adan, commander of the 162d Armored (Reserve) Division earmarked for the Sinai, left his morning meeting with Elazar puzzled by the prospect of war and even skeptical of its outbreak that evening: "That the Egyptians and Syrians would dare to launch a war against Israel seemed incredible. I couldn't believe that they were unaware that the Israel Defense Forces were far superior to theirs, and they would be risking a painful defeat."⁵⁰ Such Israeli reactions were widespread.



The Heroism of the Egyptian Soldier

Egyptians crossing the canal



Mid-East Wars: The Yom Kippur War

An Egyptian BTR-50 APC climbs the steep rampart on the Israeli side of the Suez Canal



Egyptian Armor crossing the Suez in the first days of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War

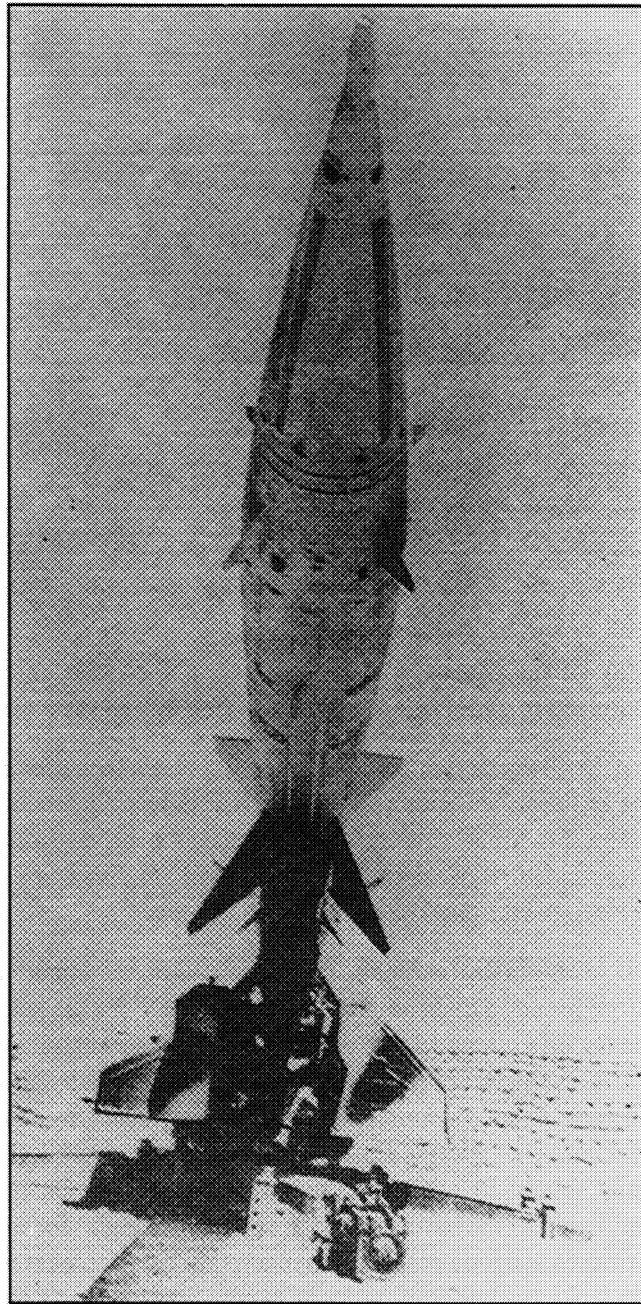
The sudden and unexpected mobilization of reserves created its own set of problems. As Dayan noted: "Despite our self-confidence, there was disquiet in our hearts. It was not only that we were not used to a campaign where the initiative was in the hands of the enemy. The entire situation was out of keeping with our character and with the organic structure of our army, based as it is on reserves and their orderly mobilization. The transition within twenty-four hours from desk, tractor, and lathe to the battlefield is not at all easy."⁵¹ Getting equipment quickly out of storage and to the front created numerous difficulties. Traffic jams developed along the few routes across the Sinai as reservists rushed to the front. One Israeli general who had fought in the Sinai in both 1956 and 1967 noted the golden opportunity missed by the Egyptians to take advantage of these congested arteries: "Had the Egyptian Air Force attacked our stalled convoys on the Qantara [to] al-Arish Road, I doubt that we would have escaped the same disastrous fate that befell the Egyptian forces from the Israeli air attacks on that same road in the 1956 and 1967 wars."⁵²

Most important from the point of view of military operations, the Arab surprise negated the very foundations of Israel's war plans. The Sinai garrison numbered only 18,000 troops, 291 tanks, and forty-eight artillery pieces. Major General Avraham Mandler commanded the 252d Armored Division, while Major General Shmuel Gonen headed Southern Command. However, only 460 Israeli reservists from the Jerusalem Infantry Brigade—with little or no combat experience—manned the sixteen strongpoints of the Bar-Lev Line. Behind them stood the required three armored brigades: Colonel Amnon Reshef's Armored Brigade in the forward tactical zone of the canal, with Colonel Dan Shomron's Armored Brigade east of the Giddi and Mitla Passes, and Colonel Gabi Amir's Armored Brigade near Bir Gifgafa. Though placed on C alert and informed of the anticipated Egyptian attack, none of the three brigades deployed according to Dovecoat (the defensive plan)—a failure of which Elazar only became aware after the war. Gonen had ordered armor units to commence their final deployments at 1600, or only two hours before the expected invasion hour—actually two hours too late! Apparently, only

Orkal, the northernmost strongpoint on the Suez Canal south of Port Fu'ad, was reinforced by a tank platoon according to Dovecoat.⁵³

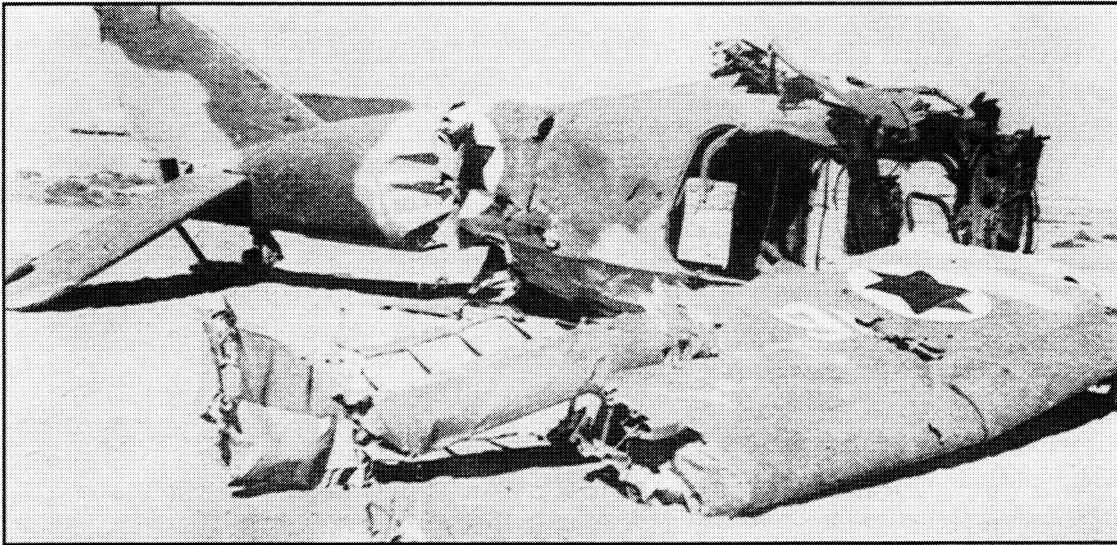
The speed of the Arab attack surprised the IDF at all levels of command, catching Israeli units completely unprepared. The Israeli Air Force had expected to concentrate its effort on destroying the Egyptian air defense system but instead found itself providing ground support to stop the Egyptians attempting to cross the Suez Canal. Israeli pilots flying to the front thus encountered the dense Egyptian air defense system over the battlefield. The mobile SAM-6s, new to the theater, proved especially troublesome, but it was the sheer density of fire that inflicted havoc on the Israeli Air Force. As described by one Skyhawk pilot: "It was like flying through hail. The skies were suddenly filled with SAMs and it required every bit of concentration to avoid being hit and still execute your mission."⁵⁴ The barrage of missiles downed a number of Israeli planes. One pilot avoided five missiles before the sixth destroyed his plane. This onslaught forced pilots to drop their bombs in support of ground troops at safer distances, and they frequently missed targets altogether.

Meanwhile, on the ground, war plans called for a positional defense of the Bar-Lev Line. In accordance with Dovecoat, Reshef rushed his tank units forward to support the strongpoints and defeat the Egyptian effort to cross to the east bank. None of the Israelis expected to find swarms of Egyptian soldiers waiting in ambush, so company commanders had failed to conduct reconnaissance beforehand. Consequently, Egyptian antitank teams succeeded in ambushing a number of Israeli units attempting to reach the water line. Those Israelis who managed to reach the canal found themselves in the midst of massive Egyptian fires, some of them emanating from the Egyptian sand barrier constructed on the west



An Egyptian SAM missile, a bane to Israeli planes in the early days of the war

In the Memory of the Passing of 2 Years . . .



An Israeli jet, the victim of an Egyptian missile

bank of the Suez Canal. A number of Egyptian units failed to encounter Israeli forces and managed to avoid casualties on the first day of the war.

While Israeli units confronted the tactical challenge of defeating larger Egyptian forces on the east bank, Southern Command sought to determine the Egyptian main effort. There was none! Egyptian strategy had opted for a broad-front attack instead. As a result, Southern Command lost precious hours attempting to discover something their training suggested should exist for a military operation of this scope.

Caught by surprise, the Israeli high command failed to withdraw its troops from the strongpoints, a decision that haunted the IDF for the next several days. Dovecoat anticipated that the Israeli military would defeat Egyptian crossings at or near the water line. But all war planning had presumed adequate advance warning, which failed to materialize. Despite the Egyptian surprise attack, senior Israeli commanders felt no sense of urgency to order the immediate evacuation of strongpoints. Rather, the troops were left to fend for themselves. Meanwhile, rear units sought to reinforce them without a clear understanding of what to do next, given the confusion of the battlefield. During the first night, for example, an Israeli tank force from Amir's Armored Brigade managed to reach the strongpoint at Qantara, but Southern Command ordered the tanks to withdraw without evacuating the fort's troops. Ironically, the Israeli tanks had to fight their way back to the rear while the garrison troops were left to their fate.⁵⁵

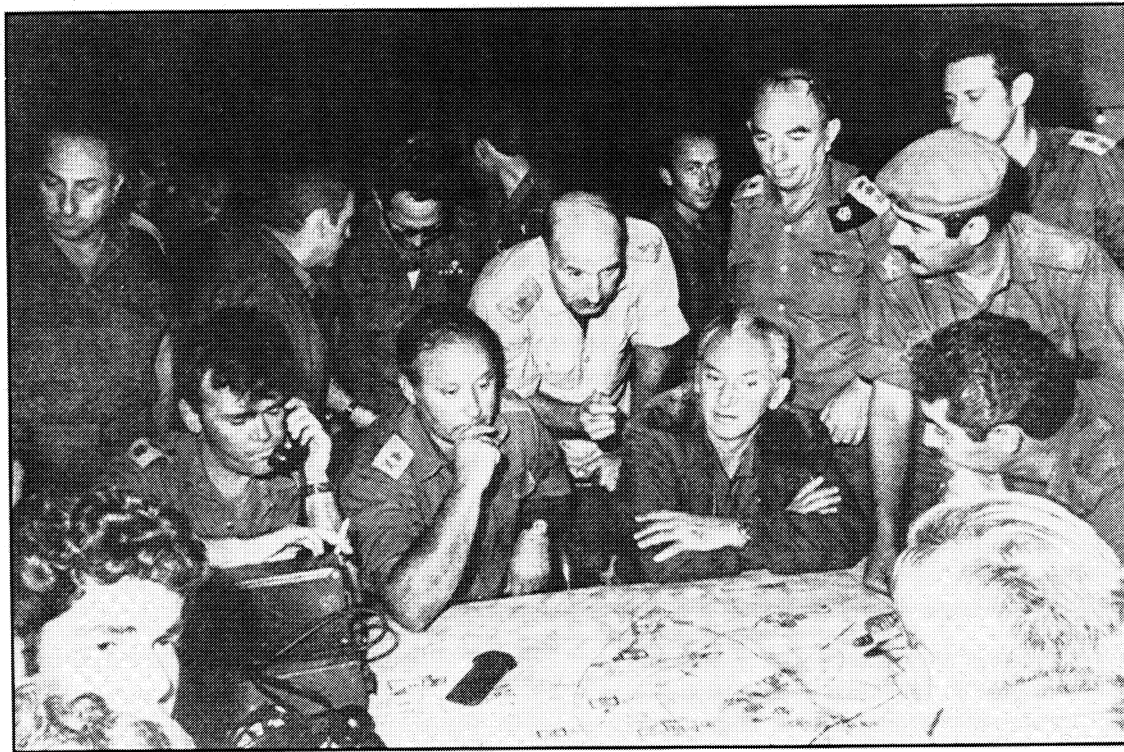
Until midmorning of 7 October, Elazar kept instructing Gonen to evacuate only those outposts not in the proximity of major enemy thrusts—even though, by the late evening of 6 October, Egyptian soldiers had in fact surrounded virtually all the strongpoints. Only after some twenty hours into the war did Gonen finally order those troops able to evacuate their positions to do so.⁵⁶ But by then, it was too late for the men remaining at the strongpoints, and they would remain a thorn in Southern Command's side. The troops inside the strongpoints had become, in effect, hostages requiring rescue.

The Israeli delay in evacuating their strongpoints actually abetted the Egyptians in their strategic objective of inflicting as many casualties in men, weapons, and equipment as possible.



In the Memory of the Passing of 2 Years . . .

Fortifications along the Bar-Lev Line being assaulted by Egyptian infantry



The War of Atonement: October, 1973

Major General Hofi confers with Lieutenant General Bar-Lev at the Northern Command headquarters. Major General Mordechai Hod leans between the two men.



Some of the more than 200 Israeli prisoners who experienced a relatively new phenomenon for Israeli soldiers—mass capture

Because the Israeli military's doctrine and ethos calls for Israelis not to abandon their fellow soldiers—whether alive or dead—many commanders and soldiers experienced great anxiety and desired to relieve or support the isolated troops—especially since desperate calls for help occasionally emanated from them. There was thus a tendency, as noted by Major General Avraham Adan, for tank units to react “instinctively—just as they had learned to do during the War of Attrition—by rushing to the strongpoints.”⁵⁷ During the first several days of the war, the area around these fortifications served as killing grounds for Egyptian troops, who aggressively ambushed Israeli counterattacks. The majority of the high losses experienced by the IDF during the first two days of the war can be attributed, in large measure, to the Israelis' stubborn determination to relieve their troops at the strongpoints.

To enhance their troops' chances for successful crossings, Egyptian planners included two types of special operations designed to strike into the operational depth of the IDF. The purpose of both was to delay the arrival of Israeli reservists and to increase the effects of shock and confusion in the Israeli rear. The first special mission involved an amphibious operation across the Bitter Lakes, conducted by the 130th Amphibious Mechanized Brigade under the command of Colonel Mahmud Sha'ib. This marine brigade was composed of 1,000 men organized into two mechanized battalions, one antitank Sagger battalion, one antiair battalion, and a 120-mm mortar battalion. Each mechanized battalion contained ten PT-76 light tanks and forty amphibious armored personnel carriers. The brigade crossed the Bitter Lakes on 6 October in a half hour, a feat accomplished without casualties. Each reinforced battalion then made a dash for the Mitla or Giddi Passes to capture the western entrances to the Sinai and prevent the arrival of Israeli reserves heading toward the canal. The battalion heading toward Mitla Pass ran into M-60 Patton tanks, and its PT-76 light tanks proved no match for the heavier American-made armor. The

battalion sustained heavy losses and retreated in great haste. Egyptian sources claim the second battalion passed through Giddi Pass to disrupt communications east of the passes. Remnants of the 130th Brigade managed to retreat westward to Kibrit East, where the commander established a bridgehead.⁵⁸ Overall, however, these Egyptian special operations proved largely unsuccessful.

The second type of Egyptian special operation employed airborne commandos, or *sa'iq* (lightning) forces, to conduct “suicide attacks” in the operational depth of the Sinai. These elite forces were to establish ambushes along the major roads and in the passes for the purpose of delaying the arrival of Israeli reserves; they were also intended to add to the shock and confusion experienced by the IDF. For their transportation, the Egyptian commandos relied mainly on a fleet of Soviet-made Mi-8 medium-transport helicopters, each capable of ferrying approximately twenty-five soldiers. These craft were very vulnerable to combat planes, but General Command was determined to risk its elite forces. At 1730 on 6 October (at dusk), thirty helicopters departed on their assigned missions. The Egyptians repeated these dangerous operations over the next couple of days.

The report card on these air assault special operations remains controversial. Israeli sources have tended to downplay their significance, whereas the Egyptians have attributed great importance to them. In a number of cases, the Israeli Air Force discovered the helicopters and shot them down easily; other instances saw the accomplishment of missions—but at a generally very high cost in lives. One Israeli source estimates that seventy-two Egyptian sorties composed of 1,700 commandos were attempted, with the Israeli Air Force shooting down twenty Egyptian



When God Judged and Men Died

Egyptian commandos who were dropped behind Israeli lines in the Sinai

helicopters and claiming to have killed, wounded, or captured 1,100 commandos.⁵⁹ Whatever the exact figures of missions and casualties, the commandos achieved some damage to the Israeli rear. One commando force, for example, captured the Ras Sudar Pass south of Port Tawfiq and held it until 22 October. In perhaps the most famous case, Major Hamdi Shalabi, commander of the 183d *Sa'iq*a Battalion, landed a company along the northern route between Romani and Baluza and established a blocking position at 0600 on 7 October. About two hours later, this small force stopped the advance of a reserve armored brigade under the command of Colonel Natke Nir. In the ensuing battle, the Egyptian commandos killed some thirty Israeli soldiers and destroyed a dozen tanks, half a dozen half-tracks, and four transports, at a loss of seventy-five men killed ("martyrs," or *shahid*, in Egyptian parlance).⁶⁰

In Nir's case, the Egyptian ambush delayed reservists rushing to the battlefield; it also sent a new message to Israeli war veterans. Adan, Nir's division commander, noted the significance of this commando interdiction: "Natke's experience fighting against the stubborn Egyptian commandos who tried to cut off the road around Romani showed again that this was no longer the same Egyptian army we had crushed in four days in 1967. We were now dealing with a well-trained enemy, fighting with skill and dedication."⁶¹ The presence of Egyptian commandos in the rear caused anxiety among senior Israeli commanders, who subsequently allotted forces for special security. Southern Command even assigned its elite reconnaissance companies to hunt down *sa'iq*a troops and protect command centers. Moreover, installations in the rear were placed on high alert, which diverted combat forces from the front lines to be used for guard duties.⁶² While at present it is difficult to reach a definitive conclusion, the Egyptian airborne commando assaults appear to have presented more than a minor nuisance. These special operations slowed the Israelis and caused confusion, anxiety, and surprise in the Israeli rear, although at a high cost in lives of highly trained and motivated Egyptian troops.

The Egyptians could claim a major victory by the evening of the first day, 6 October, for nightfall brought them the cover necessary for the transfer of their tanks, field artillery pieces, armored vehicles, and other heavy equipment to the east bank. Egyptian planners had conducted detailed planning and countless training exercises to ensure the rapid transportation to the east bank of five infantry divisions, each reinforced with an armored brigade. To get across as fast as possible, each piece of equipment, each bridge, each unit, and each headquarters had a fixed time of arrival and destination. To facilitate efficient movement, the Corps of Engineers had constructed an elaborate road system—some 2,000 kilometers of roads and tracks—to move troops rapidly and efficiently to the Suez Canal with maximum protection and minimum congestion. Extensive field exercises and rehearsals removed glitches and improved final execution. Military police, in cooperation with engineers, worked to keep the system working according to set timetables whenever possible.

Much of the crossing operation's success hinged on the ability of the Egyptian Corps of Engineers to construct and maintain bridges across the canal. At first, the Israeli Air Force targeted bridges as an efficient means of defeating the crossing. Israeli morale subsequently rose whenever word reached the high command of the destruction of a bridge. But after several days of fighting, Elazar realized the limited results of such missions: "We destroyed seven of their bridges, and everyone was happy. The next day the bridges were functional again. [The Israeli Air Force] destroyed every bridge twice . . . [The aircraft] drop a bomb weighing a ton, one of

the bridge's sections is destroyed, and after an hour another piece is brought in and the bridge continues to function."⁶³

Egyptian engineers performed commendably in keeping the bridges and ferries operational. Although much credit must go to junior officers and soldiers, many senior Egyptian commanders performed with exemplary dedication and heroism. When the Third Army experienced delays in breaching the earthen embankments, for example, Major General Gamal Ali, the director of the engineer branch, visited the affected sector to help tackle the problem personally. For his part, Brigadier General Ahmad Hamdi, commander of the engineers in the Third Army, lost his life on October 7 while directing bridge construction. The 15,000 members of the Corps of Engineers played a major role in the success of the crossing operation.

Despite the surprising onset of the war, the Israeli senior political and military leadership remained confident of a victory in quick order. At 2200, the Israeli cabinet met to hear Elazar's report on military operations. Dayan, on his part, appeared to take a pessimistic evaluation of the military situation and recommended a pullback to a second line some twenty kilometers from the Suez Canal. Elazar, however, believed optimistically in an early victory and was averse to any withdrawals unless absolutely necessary.⁶⁴ Washington had reached a similar assessment and adopted a wait-and-see policy, confident in an early Israeli victory, one that stood only a few days or more away.⁶⁵ Although diplomatic moves would await Israeli success on the battlefield, Washington agreed to send some sophisticated equipment to Israel for the war effort.

THE SECOND DAY. Tel Aviv and Washington greatly underestimated the fighting capabilities of the Egyptian and Syrian Armies, especially the former, and more time would elapse before Israel's senior commanders grasped the extent of the Arabs' tactical successes on the battlefield. Even then, Israeli commanders generally expected a quick recovery and resolution of the conflict. Once again, their timetables proved dead wrong. More surprises would occur in the latter part of the war, as the Egyptians and Syrians continued to demonstrate unexpected combat mettle in the face of the clearly superior Israeli military machine.

Dawn on 7 October found the Israelis facing some 50,000 Egyptian troops and 400 tanks on the east bank of the Suez Canal. On the average, each Egyptian infantry division's bridgehead was six to eight kilometers in frontage and three to four kilometers in depth. And the Egyptians had achieved this amazing feat with minimal casualties: only 280 men killed and the loss of fifteen planes and twenty tanks.⁶⁶ Moreover, by this success, the Egyptian Armed Forces were now entrenched in defensive positions ready to inflict more losses in men, arms, and equipment on the Israelis.

To dislodge the Egyptians from their bridgeheads would require the Israelis to mount frontal attacks on hastily prepared defensive positions without the aid of adequate air support. The Egyptian air defense system had for the most part neutralized the Israeli Air Force over the battlefield, forcing Elazar to commit the bulk of his air assets to stabilize the more threatening Golan front. Without air support and lacking in sufficient artillery and infantry, Israeli tankers in the Sinai found themselves vulnerable. Israeli doctrine had become too armor heavy, few Israeli artillery pieces were self-propelled, and their mechanized infantry formed a weak link in their maneuver operations. While the Egyptian troops established ambushes and killing zones to handle Israeli counterattacks, the IDF's tank forces resorted to cavalry attack tactics that

culminated in serious losses. The full impact of the Egyptian and Syrian tactical achievements began to surface slowly on the second day of the war.

By the end of the morning of 7 October, General Mandler reported that his armored division numbered some 100 tanks—down from 291 at the commencement of the war. Especially hard hit was Shomron's Armored Brigade in the south, whose tank count fell from 100 to 23.⁶⁷ In light of such heavy losses, Gonen decided at noon to form a defensive line along Lateral Road, thirty kilometers east of the canal, and ordered his division commanders to deploy their forces accordingly. Small mobile units were to patrol along Artillery Road, ten kilometers from the canal, with the mission to report and delay any Egyptian advances. Concurrent with this decision, Southern Command ordered the evacuation of all strongpoints, an order issued too late, for all were surrounded by Egyptian troops.⁶⁸

Then at 1600, Elazar learned to his great dismay that the Israeli Air Force had lost thirty planes in the first twenty-seven hours of the war—a staggering figure given that the IDF was still on the defensive while engaged in fierce fighting on both fronts.⁶⁹ Rather than concentrate on destroying the Egyptian and Syrian air defense systems, the Israeli Air Force suddenly found itself forced to provide ground support. On the Golan Heights, the situation had become especially desperate. Syrian forces had virtually wiped out the Barak Armored Brigade (down from ninety to fifteen tanks) in the southern half of the Golan, leaving the road to the escarpment open for a rapid Syrian dash. Fortunately for Israel, the Syrian high command procrastinated in exploiting this golden opportunity, thereby allowing the Israelis time to bring up enough tanks for spoiling counterattacks. On 8 October, the IDF began slowly pushing Syrian forces back to the prewar Purple Line. Top priority for Israeli air assets naturally went to the Golan front.

The initial Israeli setbacks on the northern and southern fronts took a heavy toll on Israeli soldiers. Sharon later recalled his observations of the troops pulling back from the Suez Canal on 7 October: "I . . . saw something strange on their faces—not fear but bewilderment. Suddenly something was happening to them that had never happened before. These were soldiers who had been brought up on victories—not easy victories maybe, but nevertheless victories. Now they were in a state of shock. How could it be that these Egyptians were crossing the canal right in our faces? How was it that *they* were moving forward and *we* were defeated?"⁷⁰ The lethality and intense fighting of the 1973 war would bring a new type of casualty to the IDF—one resulting from combat stress.

Back at the Pit, the command center for the IDF (located in Tel Aviv), the tensions and stress ran high. Especially hard hit among the senior officials was Dayan, the defense minister since June 1967. His confidence seemed shattered on 7 October after a morning visit to the Sinai front. In a meeting at 1430 at General Headquarters in Tel Aviv, Dayan offered a dismal report, making doomsday references to the "fall of the Third Commonwealth" and the Day of Judgment. The temporary spectacle of witnessing the symbol of Israeli military prowess caving in to the pressures of war proved quite unsettling for the politicians and senior officers present. "Even first-hand accounts can scarcely convey the emotional upheaval that gripped them as they witnessed the collapse of an entire world view and with it the image of a leader who had embodied it with such charismatic power."⁷¹ Cooler heads, however, prevailed and brought a modicum of calm to an otherwise very tense situation.